

## Turning 781

### Chapter 781

Revlin spoke with a bright face, suggesting that their own experiences could be helpful to another. Excluding the fact that Princess Myra of Herne was not an Awakener, it was a commendable attitude to have.

"The First Princess Myra is indeed our ally, but she is not an Awakener."

Moreover, with no rivals left and barring any major incidents, her succession as the next Duchess of Herne seemed almost assured. Even if she were an Awakener, she wouldn't have been able to join the Cavalry.

"Ah, I see. Well, it's rare to find someone like us. Still, I'm curious about her. I wonder if we'll see her again soon."

Revlin appeared sheepish, embarrassed as if he had let his emotions lead. Yuder quietly spoke up.

"Thanks to you two, this second recruitment drive saw many more noble applicants than before. Even those not from the Herne family will need guidance from someone who has been in their shoes."

"Ah..."

Revlin's face lit up again. Sensing his excessive joy, Yuder felt the need to interject a dose of reality.

"As a newcomer, taking on such responsibilities might leave you short on time for personal training. Are you sure that's alright?"

"I know the Cavalry is a tough place to keep up with just group training... No, I know it! But fitting in with the group is also crucial. I'll work hard on both fronts."

Yuder wanted to respond that this was not out of concern but to help him face reality. However, seeing Revlin's happy face, he decided to remain silent. It was astonishing how such a pleasant boy could come from a family like Apeto.

Pruelle and Revlin briefly shared updates from their families. Except for Nipollen, who followed him to the south but did not attend the meeting, Pruelle's younger siblings were said to be doing very well. Although the Duke of Tain still couldn't accept his situation and committed misdeeds on a regular basis, looking at Pruelle's attitude, even that seemed to be enjoyable to him.

"At first, he just sent threatening letters, but now he's resorting to direct harm through hired goons. Thankfully, our servants are loyal and he can only hire outsiders."

"Is everything okay? What's the extent of the damage?"

"It's fine. No one's hurt. We were prepared for this. Each time he tries something, we gather evidence and file additional charges. He should realize soon enough that he's only harming himself... But until then, enlightening him is a child's duty."

Pruelle said this with a smile, his eyes bright yet cold.

Revlin's situation was similar yet different.

"Since father fell ill, only Aishes's people have been taking care of him, so I've never seen him. People from the family occasionally come asking if I should check on him, but... I don't really want to. Aishes seems to prefer it that way too."

It seemed that Revlin, having left the family, had no intention of returning while the current Duke and Aishes were in charge.

Unbeknownst to Revlin, the Duke of Apeto had fallen ill because Aishes coveted the Dukedom. But such ill-gotten gains wouldn't bless Aishes for long.

‘The last time I saw him, his condition looked terribly poor. Despite witnessing his uncle perish in fruitless research, he was the type who would still consider the same methods if it meant healing himself...’

Yuder thought it was time to warn Revlin about this.

After collecting his thoughts, Yuder addressed Revlin.

"Revlin."

"Huh? Oh, yes, what is it?"

"Although I am an outsider, I think it would be wise not to completely sever your concern for your family, despite not wanting to return. If something happens in the future and you're unaware, it could put you at a disadvantage."

It was natural for Aishes to hope that Revlin would lose interest in the family and not return. However, Revlin didn't need to comply with that. Quiet for now, Aishes was still Revlin's enemy, and an enemy's desires often spell harm for oneself.

After delivering a general warning, Yuder added softly,

"...Of course, you are a member of the Cavalry, and we all will support you."

"That's actually something I wanted to say to Revlin too," Pruelle interjected timely and gently.

"I understand your reluctance to look back at a family you've left, but you know, no matter what we think, others won't easily believe it. You have Nion who trusts you and came here with you, and us as well. I hope you're not too afraid to reconsider."

For Pruelle, there were still younger siblings in the family who could be reliable allies. However, Revlin had no such allies left behind, which was a significant difference.

"Ah..."

The face of the delicate boy flushed for a moment, then hardened with resolve as he nodded.

"...You're right. Disliking it doesn't change the fact that it's where I come from... Even if not Aishes, other family members could seek me out anytime. Yes, I understand. I'll do as you say. Thank you, everyone."

Revlin took the warning well, which relieved Yuder.

He advised Revlin to immediately inform the Cavalry if Aishes or anyone from Apeto's side attempted anything suspicious. As Yuder was about to leave, someone called out to him.

"Yuder!"

"Kanna?"

"Is your conversation over? Can you do me a favor?"

The fact that Kanna had waited, given the trustworthy company, suggested her request was highly confidential.

"What is it?"

"I'd like you to go to Hosanna."

Surprised at the unexpected name, Yuder blinked, and Kanna leaned in to whisper.

"Actually, ever since Hosanna regained his abilities, he's been wanting to see you. The first thing he asked after arriving here was if he could meet you."

"...Me?"

Yuder wondered what this was about, but there seemed to be a reason.

"As the brainwashing gradually faded, he seems to have developed a personal matter he wants to discuss. He probably thinks you're more trustworthy than I am or even Commander Kishiar."

'It's quite a situation.'

Was it because he knew Yuder had helped him awaken from the coma? Or because of his memory of standing against Nahan?

Whichever it was, Yuder found it unexpected that Hosanna would prefer him over the amiable Kanna or Commander Kishiar. After briefly considering his schedule for the day, Yuder nodded in agreement.

"I understand. But not now, tell him I'll come by later tonight. I'm tied up with other matters at the moment."

Hosanna, the sole confidant of Nahan and the only one among their fellow Star of Nagran who knew his hidden past.

What could he possibly want to discuss that he called out for Yuder?

Yuder turned away, swallowing the unknowable questions that arose within him.

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Inside a luxurious carriage, embossed with the Diarca family's coat of arms, departing the capital and heading south.

Kiolle da Diarca pondered deeply, 'Why has my fate turned out this way?'

He had always been the youngest son of the Diarca family, never involved in significant matters. Important affairs were handled by his father, older brother, and sisters. Kiolle's daily life consisted of nothing more than commuting to the Imperial Knights and practicing swordsmanship.

But why?

Why was he, a representative of both the Diarca family and the Imperial Knights, carrying the grand title of emissary of the Crown Prince, sitting in this carriage, heading to the undesired South?

"No matter how much I think about it... this isn't right. It just isn't..."

"What do you mean it isn't right, Sir Kiolle?"

A cold voice echoed from behind him. Kiolle stiffly turned his head. A boy, wrapped from head to toe in a luxurious cloak, sat with his arms crossed, giving Kiolle a chilling gaze.

Despite his beautiful yet youthful and fierce face, Kiolle couldn't help but clench his teeth.

This boy had always been the most infuriating part of Kiolle's already maddening life.

His name was Katchian La Orr, the Empire's sole and noble Crown Prince, someone who should never be here.

"It's nothing... I was just, thinking out loud."

Why was Crown Prince Katchian here? The answer was simple.

He had snuck onto Kiolle's carriage after escaping the palace, driven by a single-minded desire to help the 'sage' who had healed him.

'What in the world... This is driving me insane!'

Kiolle mentally shed tears of frustration, recalling the day they departed.

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That day, the weather had been dismal from the start. Dark clouds loomed since morning, casting an ominous aura, and true to that foreboding feeling, his father suddenly dropped a bolt from the blue.

"Kiolle. You have been confirmed as the representative of the Imperial Knights to head to the South. His Imperial Majesty and His Highness the Crown Prince have consented, so prepare immediately to depart tomorrow."

"What? Father, what do you mean? To the South?"

"Have you not heard the disturbing news coming from the South? It is related to that."

Kiolle, of course, had heard about the events in the South. Monsters appearing suddenly in the heart of cities, someone from the Herne Ducal family dying, the feats of the Cavalry, and Duke Peletta turning out to be not just the owner of a divine sword, but a swordmaster and so on.

He hadn't paid much heed to the Cavalry's exploits, given the monstrous Yuder Aile in their ranks, nor was he much stirred by Duke Peletta's rumor, not having witnessed it firsthand. The rest, who lived or died, seemed irrelevant to him.

He knew that his father, Duke Diarca, planned to send someone in light of these events... but he never imagined he would be the one chosen.

Kiolle, with rigid eyes, scanned his surroundings. It was a rare family meal, with all eyes inevitably turning to him. Eldest brother Kironne, the implicit heir, sat solemnly without showing emotion, but the younger siblings reacted differently.

They all barely concealed their subtle shock and envy at Kiolle. Especially the third sibling, who received the least attention from their father, seemed almost capable of igniting someone with his glare.

Kiolle, proud to a fault, wasn't fazed by such stares, but he was indeed reluctant about the situation. That was the issue.

Whenever Duke Diarca sent Kiolle out of the capital, it was usually to punish him for some mischief. The last time he left the capital, it was a forced training trip to the East, an experience he preferred not to recall. The very thought of that incident was enough to jolt him awake from sleep.

'I hate leaving the capital! The roads are muddy, sleep is uncomfortable, everything is just inconvenient! And besides, he is there too!'

That demon of the Cavalry! Yuder Aile! Remembering him, Kiolle involuntarily shivered. The deeply ingrained fear was always effective, no matter when or where.

After much contemplation, Kiolle attempted to decline as politely as he could.

"Father, I truly appreciate your words, but wouldn't one of my elder brothers or sisters be more suitable for this task?"

“So you express your reluctance to leave home in such a manner. I don’t expect you to do it perfectly, of course. But in the current situation, there’s no one more suitable than you, the only member of our family in the Imperial Knights.”

Duke Diarca saw through Kiolle's shallow pretense at once. As Kiolle fell silent, a sense of vindication flickered in the eyes of his envious siblings. However, they failed to notice the significant change in the way Duke Diarca looked at Kiolle.

“But... I am currently the escort of His Highness the Crown Prince. How uncomfortable he would be without me.”

“His Highness the Crown Prince has already agreed to let you go.”

“Really, Father?”

Even the surrounding attendants, who the Crown Prince distrusted and often treated harshly, had quickly agreed to send him away? Kiolle found this hard to believe.

“You’ve realized that your selection signifies His Highness the Crown Prince’s deep concern for the imperial citizens. It’s a relief that those arrogant healers, at the very least, seem to have restored His Highness’s mind to its former clarity.”

“...”

“The Emperor’s approval has already been given, so stop your nonsense and quietly prepare to leave.”

‘Damn it...!’

Kiolle, unable to defy his father, reluctantly agreed. Duke Diarca observed this with a thinly veiled satisfaction, his eyes narrowing into a pleased smile.

“Stop there, Kiolle.”



As he was slipping away after dinner, Kiolle was caught by his third brother.

“Don’t get too arrogant because Father has taken a slight liking to you after the last incident. This is merely a test. Do you think you can hide your foolish nature just because you act a bit more mature?”

Had it been the old times, Kiolle would have retorted, but since becoming unable to speak harshly to others, his patience had forcibly grown. As Kiolle, frowning, attempted to ignore him and move on, his brother’s face reddened with anger.

“No matter how much you're favored, you can't take the eldest brother’s place! Remember the lowly origins of your mother!”

“...”

At these words, Kiolle stopped dead in his tracks. He turned to look at his brother, clearly angry, but again, he didn’t retaliate. His level of patience was entirely different from what it had been just a year ago.

Unknowingly sensing Kiolle’s growth, the third brother flinched, but Kiolle, desperately clinging to his vow, spoke up.

“So? What about it? What does that have to do with this mission? When did I ever say I wanted to take the eldest’s place?”

“What, what?”

“If you have evidence, say it. If not, just go and sleep. Aren’t you ashamed, as a member of the Diarca family, acting like this? Unlike you, who can't even get a word in with Father, I have too much to do and am tired. I’ll be going now.”

It pained him to beat around the bush like this, but to others, his retreating figure seemed like a young man who had matured enough to swallow his anger.

The third brother, not wanting to admit he had been outmaneuvered, belatedly clenched his fist and shouted.

“You... how dare you... Kiolle! Stop right there! You insolent brat. I will... I will reveal your true nature...!”

Regardless of his brother’s ranting, Kiolle gloomily returned to his room to prepare for his journey South. His servants, noticing the newfound sturdiness in their young master, were elated that he was finally entrusted with a major family responsibility, though their congratulatory words fell on deaf ears.

Since he had to leave the next day, Kiolle still had to attend to his duties today. Reporting to the Bright Palace, he met with the knights who would guard the Crown Prince in his absence, and gave them a brief and rather informal handover of his duties.

The Crown Prince, whom he met to bid farewell, looked a bit pale but surprisingly calm and composed compared to usual. Knowing that he had gone to great lengths to save some fraudulent healers recently, Kiolle felt an uneasy twinge even as he observed this.

‘Those frauds haven’t brainwashed Father, that’s for sure. But the Crown Prince...’

Kiolle wanted to believe otherwise, but he found it hard to be certain. His mind was uneasy, especially as the Crown Prince before him appeared to be in normal condition.

Recently, the Crown Prince had submitted a report, accusing culprits of an intrusion at the Sun Palace based on a list prepared by Duke Diarca, only to have it rejected. Afterwards, an anonymous tip related to the real culprits, and seemingly involving the Crown Prince’s fraudulent healers, mysteriously reached him. Enraged like a wildfire, the Crown Prince vehemently vowed to capture the liar who tried to frame his healers, leading to several attendants being dismissed.

The former Crown Prince would have suspected the healers too in such a situation, but he had been uncharacteristically lenient, not even bothering to search for the healers who had left the palace. Besides this, there were several other odd behaviors, but aiding those frauds to escape from Duke Diarca and sending them to the South was the most significant.

‘Could it be... he’s already been deceived? Then what should I do? And what about Father...’

His thoughts were interrupted as the Crown Prince spoke.

“Sir Kiolle. I hear you leave tomorrow. It’s an early departure.”

“Yes. My father said the situation in the South is urgent.”

“I’m aware of the situation. It’s regrettable, but our imperial citizens are in trouble, and as a pillar of this empire, I must do my part. Don’t forget that you carry my name on your shoulders.”

“... Yes, I understand. I will do my utmost not to bring any dishonor to you, Your Highness.”

“And when exactly are you planning to leave? At dawn, I presume?”

“Yes. I plan to depart before sunrise.”

Kiolle, not realizing that it was unusual for the Crown Prince to ask such questions, naively answered.

“It’ll be tough. I’ve already arranged for your smooth passage through the South Gate. Just show your face to the officer in charge and exchange greetings, and you should be able to leave right away.”

“That’s very considerate... Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Think nothing of it. You are representing me, after all, so this is only natural.”

The Crown Prince smiled. Kiolle swallowed his unease and smiled back.

The next morning, just before dawn, at the city’s last checkpoint, the South Gate guard post.

Even as Kiolle exchanged greetings with the officer in charge and prepared to leave, he failed to notice anything unusual. However, after leaving the capital and reaching the first stop, he went to open the door of the carriage storing his personal belongings and was shocked to find an intruder, like a rat scurrying for cover.

“Who are you!”

He drew his sword and knocked the figure over. Thinking it might be an assassin, Kiolle quickly subdued them and removed the cloth covering the body. To his utter astonishment, the face revealed was the last he expected, prompting him to cry out in shock.

“...Your Highness!”

“Ugh, cough... You dare... do that to me...”

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"Your Highness!"

Coughing harshly and with pain etching his face, Crown Prince Katchian glared fiercely. Kiolle quickly supported him, lowering his voice in urgent inquiry.

"Why on earth are you here, Your Highness...?!"

"I had to see for myself how things were unfolding and to help those in need!"

"Your Highness?"

"Duke Diarca always told me to wait and everything would turn out fine. But he never listened or even remembered what I asked for! I've been patient until now, but I won't overlook this. If I remain silent this time, even Ajihen Toom, who has truly been on my side, will disappear! Do you think I'll just stand by and let that happen?"

"Ajihen Toom? That scamm... I mean, the healer?"

Kiolle nearly called him a scammer, a moment of supreme self-restraint in his life, so astonishing that even Yuder would have been shocked. But Kiolle was so dumbfounded that he didn't think anything of it.

"Didn't you see, Your Highness? That man... he was part of the group behind the explosion in the capital, and moreover, he's an Awakener! He's not worth saving to this extent!"

"Your dislike for the Awakener is your own, Sir Kiolle. Not mine."

"Your Highness? What do you mean..."

"I trust an Awakener who shows me true loyalty and is ready to risk their life for me more than those who try to control me like a puppet."

The Crown Prince then revealed something shocking.

"Initially, I didn't trust him either. But before leaving Bright Palace, Ajihen Toom confessed everything to me, sincerely saying his treatment was done."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that it wasn't that I've never had loyal people around me, but they were driven away by those close to me, supposedly for my protection. He fears he will meet the same fate."

The Crown Prince's eyes sparkled as if he'd finally found the answer he'd been seeking. There was no trace of the resentment and anger he'd shown when lashing out at his servants.

"Sure enough, attempts were made to separate him from me afterward, just like a prophecy. After witnessing all this, I've decided to trust him. No one else has ever understood and cared for me this sincerely."

"But Your Highness, that's not it..."

Kiolle knew that those fraudsters had first tried to ingratiate themselves with Duke Diarca before the Crown Prince. The thought of a mind-manipulating charlatan posing as a healer and swearing fealty was laughable.

Yet, when Kiolle tried to argue, it seemed the Crown Prince heard nothing, only returning sharper anger.

"Sir Kiolle, did you really think I was unaware of your surveillance of Ajihen Toom and his associates, on Duke Diarca's orders, seeking a chance to oust them?"

"That's...!"

Kiolle was at a loss. Duke Diarca had indeed ordered him to keep an eye on the sage's group to prevent mischief. But how could he admit that his vigilant watch was also due to a temporary alliance with a demonic entity of the Cavalry?

As Kiolle hesitated and fell silent, the Crown Prince raised his voice, seizing the opportunity.

"The Duke appointed you as the representative for this matter because you're the one who knows Ajihen Toom the closest. As soon as you headed south, you must have planned to eliminate him rather than help!"

"That's not true! Why would I, of all people, do something like that? I had no intention of lifting a finger in that bothersome affair after reaching the south!"

"Despite your well-known filial devotion to the Duke, you're trying hard to deny it, I see."

"It's the truth!"

Holding back his anger and trying to phrase his words carefully was proving to be an overwhelming challenge for him. The more he spoke, the more his words came out sounding like the epitome of a lazy, worthless noble.

"Deny it all you want, it doesn't matter. In the end, you'll follow my orders."

"Your Highness?"

"Do you think I came here without any purpose?"

Torn between wanting to respond and considering the merit of remaining silent, Kiolle struggled internally. Fortunately, before he could answer, the Crown Prince spoke up.

"The moment you were chosen for this task, I thought it was the 'chance to break free' that Ajihen Toom had mentioned. Anyone else from the Diarca family might not understand, but you're different, aren't you?"

"What are you implying...?"

"I know you're harboring a shameful secret that you can't reveal to your family."

The moment Kiolle saw the Crown Prince's narrowed eyes, he was struck by a lightning bolt of shock.

'Impossible? No, it can't be. Nobody knows about my oath with that demon of the Cavalry... That's the first condition of the agreement!'

Kiolle realized he couldn't disclose the events to anyone. But had the secret been revealed without his knowledge, would it be considered a breach of the oath? His face turned white and expressionless as the Crown Prince whispered mockingly.

"Imagine the shock the old Duke would feel upon learning his beloved youngest son is a debauchee. Especially since he's someone who values stiff, old-fashioned propriety. Such tragic news might lay him low, or worse, he might decide to disown you entirely."

The words flew in one ear and out the other of the tense, pale Kiolle.

'...I'm what, exactly?'

A debauchee?

It took Kiolle a moment to find his voice, still dumbfounded.

"Debauchee?"

"If you value your honor and life, you'll do well to handle this. The reason for my visit and the aftermath are your responsibility. Any mistakes, and you'll be the one to blame."

A victorious smile spread across the Crown Prince's handsome face.

"As my bodyguard, I trust you can handle at least this much, right?"

Only after hearing the Crown Prince's veiled threat of revealing the truth did Kiolle fully grasp the dire situation he was in.

"Just wait, Your Highness. I am not a debauchee...!"

"Oh? Then who was that person you secretly slipped away with during the harvest festival and the last party?"

"..."

"I already know you're not the sharpest tool. Don't bother denying it and make things worse."

'But it's not true... it's really not!'

Kiolle's mind flashed to the one common face he had encountered on both of those occasions.

He was infuriated at the injustice of being misunderstood as a debauchee because of Yuder Aile, and even more so because he couldn't clarify the misunderstanding.

The Crown Prince, having fled the palace to save a mere swindler and hiding in a carriage, now seemed to be under the sway of that very person, displaying behavior that suggested he was brainwashed. Kiolle knew if Duke Diarca learned of this, his end would be sealed.

'I'll be blamed for failing my duties as a guard. Maybe it's better to be known as a debauchee... But no! Why do these things always happen to me!'

For someone unaccustomed to such deep thinking, it felt like his head would burst. Filled with indignation, Kiolle discreetly escorted the Crown Prince to his carriage, away from prying eyes. He excused the Crown Prince's presence to the servants as a secret imperial attendant, but whether they believed him was another matter.

As they neared their southern destination, Kiolle, slumped in the carriage, pondered the situation to the best of his ability.



'Firstly, it seems the Crown Prince indeed suffered something at the hands of that swindler. Once we reach the south, I must meet with that demon. Being an Awakener, he might know how to reverse this.'

Kiolle had no desire to involve the Cavalry in the south if he could avoid it. Yet, it seemed fate had other plans for him.

Lost in thought, Kiolle was jolted from his reverie by the sudden, harsh stop of the carriage.

"What's the matter? Why have we stopped abruptly?"

"Apologies, my lord. A carriage ahead has blocked the road!"

The most direct and well-maintained route to their destination was narrow, allowing only a few carriages to pass at a time. Now, a line of black carriages had unexpectedly blocked their path, as explained by the coachman. Kiolle, infuriated, demanded to know who would dare block the Diarca family's way.

"The carriages are covered in black, making it impossible to identify the family."

Could it be some kind of funeral carriage? Kiolle gritted his teeth, opened the carriage door, and stepped out, partly to escape the company of the seemingly brainwashed Crown Prince.

Outside, a row of massive black carriages indeed blocked the road, seemingly not belonging to an ordinary family.

'What in the world?'

As Kiolle narrowed his eyes, a servant dressed in fine clothes leaped from the largest carriage and approached. Kiolle's eyes widened upon recognizing the crest embroidered on the servant's clothes.

'That crest... Herne?'

"Welcome, Yuder. It's been a long time since we last met."

"Yes, it's good to see you in good health, Alik."

"Ah, it's nothing. Haha."

Yuder greeted Alik, whom he hadn't seen in a while, and glanced around the small temporary research lab that Alik had set up in the southern branch, his face slightly haggard but smiling.

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Yuder greeted Alik with a warm smile, encountering him after a long separation. Alik, his face slightly worn, chuckled as he introduced his modest, temporary research space established in the southern branch.

"Who would have thought you'd offer me not just one, but two rooms? Therefore, one is for Mage Hellem, and the other for myself. Ah, a research lab of my own! Temporary it may be, but it feels like a dream!"

"Have you never had a lab of your own before?"

"Indeed, it's not because I lacked money or my master was stingy. It's due to the traditions among mages!"

According to Alik, mages under a master's tutelage rarely had the opportunity to have their own labs until they gained recognition or independence from their master. If the master was the root, the apprentice was like a branch extending from it, as Yuder attentively listened, picking up on a particular word in the lengthy explanation.

"The relationship between a direct master and apprentice among mages is considered special, different from just being part of the same alliance or organization. In the mages' terms... um, like a 'Spiritual father,' so to speak."

'Spiritual father' – a term used to refer to the Archmage Luma in the diary of the First Duke Tain. It was surprising to hear it still in use, thinking it a phrase of the old times.

Seizing the moment, Yuder asked Alik if he knew anything relevant.

"Fascinating. Then, did the Archmage Luma also have disciples who called him 'Spiritual father'?"

"The Archmage Luma? Hmm, an interesting question indeed. In fact, the term 'Spiritual father' is believed to have originated from him."

"Is that so?"

"Since ancient times, mages called Archmages during the Empire's early days preferred to teach a broader audience rather than just a few close disciples. Their aim wasn't just to impart their magic knowledge, but to rescue those mages suffering and shunned due to their unrecognizable powers."

It was a familiar story, perhaps because of Yuder's previous visit to the graveyard where the secret diary of the First Duke Tain lay buried. However, this time the story resonated differently.

It felt like realizing that old tales, as recorded in ancient documents, shared considerable commonalities with the present.

Alik's story, while discussing the early days' mages, had striking parallels with the current activities of the Cavalry.

"However, the Archmage Luma was different. He was close not only to the First Emperor and Empress but also taught magic personally to their four children, stemming from the fact that the First Empress was a mage herself. This practice is considered the origin of the court mages who continue to teach the princes and princesses to this day. It was from this relationship that the term 'Spiritual father' for a master spread widely."

"I see."

"Yet, it's a pity that none of the four who received direct tutelage delved deeply into the magic world. The First Duke Tain was somewhat renowned for his research in those times, but alas, scarce records remain. Thus, the lineage of the Archmage Luma's direct disciples seems to have been lost."

Clearly, like Alik, modern mages were unaware of the First Duke Tain's research aims and achievements.

"I'm not sure if the Commander has already informed you, but Alik, you will be in charge of the continuous production and research of the ability suppression devices here. I heard you brought the quantity already produced in the capital. Have you delivered it yet?"

"No, I was about to, but I wasn't told whom to give it to, so I still have it."

"Then give it to me. I will take care of the delivery."

"Really? It's quite heavy... But with your wind ability, Yuder, it should be fine."

Alik's initial concern quickly turned into a relieved smile.

"You have no idea how hard it was for me to carry those along with Mage Hellem's monster. I thought I was going to die. Both are related to research, so I couldn't entrust them to others, and I couldn't let the elderly Mage Hellem carry them, so naturally..."

"Wait, Alik. What monster are you talking about?"

Yuder, interrupting him, raised his hand inquisitively. Alik blinked in surprise and then replied.

"Penpen, the long-tailed black monster. You caught it yourself, remember?"

"You brought it here with you?"

"I thought you knew. It's actively involved in the research, so Mage Hellem brought it along. The prototypes of my suppression devices are also placed with its enclosure. You should see for yourself."

"Why there... No, never mind. No need to answer."

Yuder recalled Mage Hellem, who seemed like a kindly old woman. As a former head of the court mages, she too had the characteristic mage-ly trait of prioritizing research above all else.

"Mage Hellem! Are you there? I'm coming in!"

Alik knocked on the door connecting to his lab and entered without waiting for a response.

"Is it alright to just walk in like that?"

"At this time, she's likely writing in her research journal. She wouldn't hear us knocking anyway, so it's better to just enter."

Alik's calm reply showed the depth of experience gained from his long apprenticeship under Master Thais Yulman.

As expected, Mage Hellem was engrossed in writing something, surrounded by several open books on her desk, unaware of their arrival.

"Mage Hellem. I'm here. Yuder is with me."

"Hmm? Ah. It's been a while."

Noticing Yuder, Mage Hellem adjusted her glasses, smiling warmly.

"I suppose you're not here to see me, so what brings you?"

"We've come to help move Alik's suppression devices."

"Ah, those wildly unpredictable toys."

"They're not toys, Mage Hellem. They're masterpieces of my research."

Alik protested meekly, but Mage Hellem seemed to pay no heed.

"They're over there. Take them. But you look thinner than a skewer since I last saw you. I wonder if you're eating well."

Though they had barely met since Yuder joined the Cavalry, she had always been surprisingly kind to him. The only issue was her constant remarks about him losing weight.

"I am eating well."

"You might not be as robust as our lord or Nathan, but you should at least put on some weight like Alik. I worry seeing you thinner each time."

Yuder's weight, in fact, had not changed at all, but to the eyes of a mage accustomed to the stature of individuals like Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, he appeared otherwise. Yuder glanced at Alik, who looked slightly pale but still had chubby cheeks, and then fell silent.

Mage Hellem expressed concern that the lord would not neglect his assistant's meals, but thankfully, she did not dwell further on the topic after emphasizing the importance of eating well even amidst busyness.

"The south is so much warmer compared to the north and the capital, which I like. It's just a pity that I can't stay here forever. Earlier, I noticed some clueless fellows wandering outside, conducting some sort of investigation. Turns out they're from the Sapphire Mage Union."

It seemed Mage Hellem was curious about the Sapphire Mage Union. Yuder nodded and explained the task he had entrusted to them.

"Yes, I asked them to investigate any changes in the flow of magic energy in the area due to the recent monster appearance."

"From what I saw, I'm not sure if they can handle it properly... If it proves unsatisfactory, could you tell the lord I'll take over?"

Yuder would welcome Mage Hellem's assistance. She had already inspected the monster's carcass upon arrival and promised to report as soon as her investigation was complete. Yuder felt anew that it was a good decision to have summoned her here.

'Now, all that's left is to move the suppression devices.'

Yuder approached the area where a cage covered with a black cloth was located. The rustling sound inside indicated that Penpen was indeed there. Alik shuddered at the thought of touching the cage and gestured with his eyes.

"That one there, the black bag. Yes, that's it."

The bag looked too heavy for one man to carry, but for Yuder, it was not a problem. He used the power of wind to lift the bag effortlessly, sending it flying towards the door of Alik's lab, then turned to Mage Hellem to bid farewell.

"I'll come to visit again next time."

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"I'll come to visit again next time."

"Farewell then," was the reply.

Upon receiving Hellem's farewell and stepping into the adjacent laboratory, Alik immediately rushed to his bag. He eagerly unpacked the meticulously wrapped and stacked suppression device, chattering excitedly.

"Mage Hellem, indeed. Despite our differing fields of study, I fail to understand how she can dismiss this masterpiece as a mere toy. Yet, she seems quite fond of Yuder. Had I gone alone, she surely would have burdened me with more tasks. But her concern for Yuder spared me; that was fortunate."

'It's more about her general kindness than particular fondness for me,' Yuder thought. She seemed to treat young ones like a benevolent grandmother, but apparently, she was different with her junior mages.

"She must be quite strict with you usually."

"Hm? No, not really! She gives me lots of work, but she's not strict. You should have seen how she is with my Master. Absolutely terrifying, no joke."

That Hellem could be so daunting, especially toward Master Thais Yulman, was hard to imagine.

"Is that so?"

"Huh? You sound skeptical. But it's true!"

Alik chuckled as he unwrapped the packaging.

"When they first met, Mage Hellem had glanced around the lab and made a pointed remark to my Master about still treating disciples this way... My Master, known for ignoring others' opinions and doing as he pleases, dared not act that way in front of Mage Hellem."

It seemed that Alik had developed a deep respect for Hellem since that incident.

"I overheard Master saying once that Mage Hellem used to be quite remarkable... Ah, now it's all done."

Alik had finally placed all the suppression devices on the table. Yuder first thought them to be about ten, but surprisingly, the quantity was quite substantial.

"How many have you made?"

"About fifty. It got faster once I got the hang of it."

Alik proudly displayed and explained his creations.

"Half are in necklace form, the rest bracelets. From my testing, bracelets worn on both hands seem to have a better suppression effect."

The suppression device, fashioned as accessories, looked remarkably ordinary, hardly resembling restraints. Yuder tested the strength of the completed devices, confirming their durability against significant force.

"They're sturdy. This should suffice."



"Right? I think this level of suppression should be enough for those who struggle to manage their powers. However, what the Cavalry currently needs is more of these for people who have committed crimes and need monitoring. So, on my way here, I thought of something..."

Alik shyly suggested adding a special key mechanism to the restraints and reinforcing them with the power of an enhancer. Luckily, there were a few members in the Cavalry with such abilities, making it a good idea.

"Of course, adding locks and keyholes will increase the cost and complicate the process... What do you think, Yuder?"

"As long as it doesn't take too much time, it seems fine."

"I've already thought through the design. It won't take long."

"Understood. I'll speak to the commander and arrange the necessary support."

Yuder didn't even consider the possibility of Kishiar's refusal. Even if Kishiar had been there, he would have made the same decision.

"Ah! Truly, a commendable decision from the Commander's assistant. Thank you for your unequivocal support."

Alik's face lit up with a beaming smile at the promise of unrestricted research support, and he took a deep breath in anticipation.

"Now comes the most crucial moment. The time to test the prototype's performance."

Alik solemnly raised two bracelets, boasting of the enhanced performance of the suppression device he had refined in the capital.

"Would you mind trying these on?"

Both knew that the bracelets would likely not affect Yuder. Nevertheless, this was an opportunity to gauge their improved strength, so Yuder readily accepted the offer.

"Alright."

As Alik fitted the newly crafted suppression bracelets on his wrists, a sudden sensation of heaviness pervaded his body, as if his naturally flowing power had abruptly solidified.

'But still... it's nowhere near the sensation I experienced in Reneve's domain.'

Yuder clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, then extended his hand and exerted his power into the air. After a brief, trembling resistance, the bracelets shattered with a crack, unable to withstand the pressure.

Simultaneously, a burst of red flames erupted before their eyes.

"Ah..."

Alik gathered the scattered bracelet fragments with a look of disappointment.

"It seems the suppression power has indeed increased significantly."

"Yes... Though it lasted only a few seconds longer."

"That few seconds' difference could be significant for ordinary Awakeners."

"If someone else had said that, it would have sounded extremely annoying... But coming from you, Yuder, I have no retort."

Alik joked, then laughed sheepishly.

"Testing these has made me realize how much my abilities have grown. But the more powerful I become, the more I understand how incomprehensible Yuder's powers are. If my power is like a spring, Yuder's is like an ocean. It's no wonder these mere wooden-bracelet-like contraptions struggle to contain it."

"..."

"So, it's challenging... but perhaps that challenge is what fuels my passion."

Alik clenched his fist with a determined, unshaken expression, truly befitting a disciple of Thais Yulman.

To encourage him, Yuder shared information about Reneve.

"You might not have heard, but among the Awakeners who joined us from the south, there's someone who can create a domain that suppresses the powers of other Awakeners."

"What? I didn't hear... Well, I vaguely remember hearing something about an underground mechanism keeping the prison running without suppression device... But it's a person, not a device?!"

"Yes. A person. The Commander said meeting this individual might greatly aid in your research on improving the suppression device. So wait here, Kanna will be coming to get you soon."

"Good heavens! I'm already so excited! I should prepare beforehand!"

Alik's eyes sparkled with excitement. Yuder watched him, bubbling with anticipation, and felt a slight worry that Reneve might be overwhelmed by his enthusiasm.

'Well... Kanna will guide him, so she'll handle that.'

"Thanks for telling me, Yuder! I'll leave the suppression device here; feel free to take as many as you need! I'll resume making new ones after meeting this Reneve!"

After giving Yuder a hearty hug, Alik hummed a tune and dashed towards a pile of luggage in the corner of the room. Yuder quietly left, allowing him to continue undisturbed, and walked down the corridor.

The corridors of the southern branch had become unmistakably livelier since receiving support from the capital. Yet, this liveliness was not due to chaos, but rather the opposite.

Even though they might be guarded because they were mixed with the successful applicants and the Imperial soldiers, no one shunned others. Following Kishiar's directive, everyone mingled without reluctance, actively seeking ways to contribute and continuously moving about.

There had been concerns that some might show arrogance or discriminate against the new recruits or Imperial soldiers. It was planned to set an example by reprimanding such behavior through a spar, but such worries proved unnecessary.

'This atmosphere is probably due to the efforts of Ever and those who had experienced the failure of missing the sage in the capital. They are the most active ones now.'

Those involved in that mission were among the most skilled and highborn in the Cavalry. Seeing such individuals not showing signs of despair but instead working harder, discouraged any laziness among the others.

Yuder observed the busy members for a while before moving on. His next destination was a place marked with an 'Emergency Medical Unit' sign.

"You sure arrived quickly, eh?"

As he knocked and entered, the sharp voice of Enon greeted him. Enon was lying half-reclined on a bed, having tossed his small travel bag onto it.

When Yuder glanced at Lusan's neatly placed bag beside the opposite bed, Enon spoke up with a nonchalant face.

"That kid unpacked and went to meet the other priests who came to help the southern branch. He won't be back until evening."

"..."

"Don't ask why I didn't go. Just being here is enough to irritate me."

"I thought you'd be busy treating Elpkins and others."

"That can wait till tomorrow. But we need to talk today, as you'll be too busy otherwise."

Enon grumbled, making a 'tsk' sound, and sat up.

"Come and sit. You look like you have a lot to say, so let's hear it."

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"That can wait till tomorrow. But we need to talk today, as you'll be too busy otherwise."

Enon grumbled, making a 'tsk' sound, and sat up.

"Come and sit. You look like you have a lot to say, so let's hear it."

"Come and sit. You seem to have much to say to me, let's hear it."

Many were the stories he had thought to tell Enon upon their meeting. Yet, every deed required a sequence.

Yuder deeply inhaled before staring directly into Enon's eyes and began.

"Enon, there's something I want to say first."

"What is it?"

"Even the Commander now knows where I'm from."

Enon immediately understood the implication. His eyes, half-closed in nonchalance, sharpened as he scrutinized Yuder's expression.

"Huh, so you've finally told him? How much?"

"Almost everything I remember."

"So, more detailed than what you told me?"

As Yuder nodded slightly, Enon asked in a low voice.

"And his reaction? Did he believe it?"

Ironically, Enon himself had found Yuder's words hard to believe, yet he seemed poised to storm out if Kishiar didn't believe them. Yuder, not hiding his faint smile, nodded.

"Yes."

"Everything? He believed all that madness? Without demanding proof? Didn't think you were lying?"

"There was none of that. He just... believed. Everything."

It was surprising but true.

Kishiar had unhesitatingly believed everything Yuder tried to convey and show through the strategy game. In his previous life, nobody had easily believed Yuder's tales, but Kishiar had listened earnestly. Since then, Kishiar had been acting based on the firm belief that Yuder's information was true.

Enon's eyes, which had been scrutinizing Yuder as if trying to see through him, finally relaxed.

"I thought he was no ordinary man from how he acted even when facing me directly... Huh, really. How is that possible?"

"To be honest, I didn't think he'd believe me either."

"That's what I'm saying."

Enon appeared to be admiring Kishiar genuinely, yet he seemed unable to shake off a certain displeasure. Yuder spoke to him clearly.

"Anyway, that's how it is. So, I want to start by telling you what I told the Commander. Is that alright?"

Enon was the first entity to whom Yuder revealed his return from the future. He knew how Yuder had disappeared before but not the details. Yuder wanted to start by revealing his past to Enon. If there was one person who needed to know as much as Kishiar, it was him.

"Fine. I'm a bit annoyed to be the second to know, but since that guy was the first to listen and believe, I guess you're finally ready to talk in detail."

"Then, I'll start."

"..."

"First, you know I came from the future. Precisely, I was a Cavalry Commander before being executed,"

"What, what? Wait!"

Enon suddenly raised his hand to halt the conversation, quickly standing up to lock the door and draw the curtains, ensuring no one could peep in. He paced back and forth, breathing heavily.

"No, what's with this madness from the very start... Did you speak in such a manner to your Commander as well?"

"At that time..."

"No, never mind. What glory am I even seeking here!"

Enon, having thumped his chest in frustration, sat back down. Grinding his teeth, he spoke in a voice even lower than before.

“Start again.”

“...Should I just answer your questions if it’s uncomfortable?”

“Just start from the beginning with what you were going to say! Do you think I can't handle it?”

Yuder, eventually yielding to Enon’s insistent demand, began his story anew.

Perhaps due to having repeated it several times to Kishiar, this time it wasn’t as difficult. Yuder calmly detailed how his previous life as Yudrain Aile achieved success and then fell, how the Empire unfolded, and the calamities that befell the world. This account also included newfound information about the people South of the desert in this lifetime.

When Yuder spoke of how he met and parted ways with Enon, the latter remained relatively composed. However, upon hearing how Yudrain killed Kishiar and ultimately met his end as a condemned man in his solitary struggle against the disaster, Enon couldn’t suppress his ragged breathing.

“That’s all I’ve told the Commander. I assume he might’ve guessed some of it, but surely, there must be parts different from the present.”

“...”

“Ask if you’re curious. If I can, I’ll answer.”

“Curious about?”

“What you can’t believe, or what seems strange.”

Enon then hung his head low.

“Ha. You really...”



He seemed at a loss for words, his breath hitching for a long time. Yuder thought he might be angry, but when he looked up again, Enon's face bore an expression he'd never seen before.

He gazed at Yuder with a mix of sadness and a faint, resigned smile.

"...Enon?"

"...It's just like you. To end the story here and then say to ask about anything unbelievable."

"..."

"So that's why you're still struggling through all this hardship here..."

Enon closed his eyes again, exhaling deeply.

"Didn't you want to come back for revenge? You could have rested instead of joining the Cavalry right away. Why didn't you think of that?"

Kishiar had said something similar. Yuder had asked himself the same question. He recalled those moments and spoke.

"At first, I think I did entertain such thoughts."

"It's only natural for a human. After all, you're good at returning favors twice over."

"But more than that, my heart raced more at the thought of redoing what I had failed."

Hearing this, Enon clamped his mouth shut, as if struck.

Yuder mulled over his own words. They seemed illogical, yet somehow felt all the more truthful.

It was as if something he hadn't fully understood himself had suddenly welled up from within. Yuder continued.

“I don’t know the reason. It wasn’t anything grand. Maybe it was just the biggest regret of an unfinished task. It’s the same even now.”

Yes, it wasn’t a grand reason. The mere thought of having another chance to avert the impending disaster filled him with an involuntary joy. Captivated by that thought, nothing else mattered – not revenge, not emptiness. The newfound opportunity overshadowed everything.

“Who asked you to save the world? If nobody believed in you, why go to such lengths?”

“...”

Well, why indeed?

Yuder knew he was not a paragon of virtue. He had used his power for his Commander, for the Empire, for the Cavalry, living without questioning his actions. His sole purpose was what drove and sustained him, and that was no exaggeration.

But then, one day, he found himself facing the people crumbling before the disasters striking all over the Empire.

During moments when he was engrossed in researching ways to predict and avert these disasters, lost in problems with no apparent solutions.

And then, in an almost indescribable sensation, harder even to call instinctual, he felt the onset of destruction amidst those inexplicable disasters.

He was seized by an intense feeling, like a tidal wave crashing over him.

If there was one single purpose for which his power was meant to be used, he was certain this was it.

It was as if a command, etched deep within his heart, had suddenly become clear.

This command, its origin unknown, compelled Yuder to rise and move in a direction entirely different from before...

That voice...

"...Ugh."

Lost in thought, Yuder suddenly furrowed his brow, touching his temple, overwhelmed by a piercing sensation in his head.

'What is this?'

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'What is this?'

That voice, what did it mean?

'Have I ever had such a thought? I don't recall...'

Yuder, amidst his confusion, furrowed his brow and shook his head. Every attempt to grasp the fleeting sensation resulted in a headache that throbbed like an illusion, accompanied by a faint dizziness that came and went.

Pressing his temples, Yuder tried to hold onto its end, but then,

"Why so troubled?"

Startled back to reality by Enon's worried voice gripping his shoulder, the strange sensation he was feeling plunged into the depths like a stone in water, disappearing.

"No... Just now, something... I felt like an odd memory I never had was about to surface, but it's gone now."

"What was that?"

Yuder bit his lip tightly and removed his hand from his head, where the headache had vanished.

The strange sensation had surged up naturally the moment he heard Enon's question.

The question about why he had strived so hard when no one had asked him to save the world.

Yes. There was no such person. Obviously not, but... What was that odd thought that had naturally seeped out of his subconscious?

"Did something unspeakable come to your mind? What was it?"

"...No, it wasn't that."

Seeing Yuder's silence as both frustrating and worrying, Enon asked earnestly.

Yuder shook his head and began to describe the strange experience he had just felt. His explanation was rough, given the briefness of the experience and his own difficulty in articulating it, but Enon listened seriously.

"Hmm... Have you felt this before?"

"Not exactly the same, but I've had similar experiences occasionally since I returned."

"What kind of experiences?"

Yuder hesitated before speaking.

"Sometimes, things I didn't remember... or rather, didn't even realize I had forgotten, suddenly resurfaced. It felt like... filling a hole I didn't know was empty."

"...A hole?"

Yuder had many such holes within him, unknown even to himself. They would sometimes unexpectedly fill, bringing with them forgotten memories and fragments of emotions.

The holes were not just a metaphor. Mick Shuden, who claimed to see the essence of a person's inner self, once told Yuder, "You have many holes. So many empty spaces that they're uncountable."

The frequency of these sensations had decreased recently, but the fact that it happened again while talking to Enon meant it hadn't completely gone away.

Enon's brows deepened with concern as he listened to Yuder. This seemed to trouble him more than the stories of the past life. He looked into Yuder's eyes, scrutinizing him for a long while before finally speaking.

"I can't fully grasp this 'hole' concept. But I have a theory. Your soul was a mess but began to heal, and that seems related to it."

After saying this, Enon elaborated in a way he had never done before.

"A messed-up soul means two things. One, having suffered wounds or shocks so severe that they damage your very essence. And the other, a weak bond between the body and soul."

"..."

"Elpkins and others I've seen were the former. But you, you're both. That's why you're in worse shape. Understand? I thought things had improved a lot recently, but when I looked again, I saw that the bond was loose again. I don't know what you did, but..."

"...The bond has loosened?"

"Yes! In your natural state, maintaining sanity and walking straight would be difficult!"

Enon had mostly spoken of Yuder's soul improving when he had deep connections and contact with Kishiar. Since leaving the capital and arriving here, their relationship had deepened, not lessened, yet Yuder's condition seemed to have worsened.

'Why is that?'

Yuder, letting Enon's ongoing nagging go in one ear and out the other, opened his mouth to speak.

"I understand the first part. But what's the downside of having a weak bond?"

At this, Enon finally calmed down. Pondering for a moment, he then provided an explanation.

"Hmm... To my non-human eyes, every living being appears as a combination of a physical existence and the energy that forms their essence, their soul. If the bond between these two weakens, it wouldn't be strange for one of them to scatter at any moment. And if it completely breaks?"

"...Death?"

"Yes."

His lemon-colored eyes became cold and emotionless.

"A very painful death."

"But I never felt particularly bad."

"That's because you're an anomaly!"

Yelling out, Enon then sighed.

"From what I've observed, you inherently feel less pain than others, and your ability to feel pain seems broken beyond repair. When pain becomes too overwhelming, the mind can erase that part entirely. With soul damage that severe, it's possible."

Enon kindly explained that many of the back-alley lives he had seen were like this. Those accustomed to extreme pain from a young age might later perceive that pain as pleasure, or become emotionally castrated, unable to feel it at all.

Yuder felt uneasy considering he might be one of them, but reflecting on his experiences, it didn't seem surprising.

'Still, it's unsettling. If soul damage is such a serious issue, it could suddenly hinder future endeavors...'

As Yuder silently gazed down at himself, Enon ruffled his hair roughly.

"It's hard to notice since it's not a visible pain. I don't expect you to suddenly become cautious and convalesce. But as long as you don't forget about it, you'll be fine. Anyway, I'm here with you now, and so is the Commander."

His voice was brusque, his touch rough, but the warmth felt from them was more comforting than anything. It was so like Enon.

Yuder, with his hair tousled, looked at Enon's unevenly pursed lips and slightly raised the corners of his own.

"...Understood. Thank you."

"Ugh, why do I bother with such a dark creature?"

Despite his words, Enon continued to stroke Yuder's hair a few more times before pulling away.

"But about those holes inside you, did you notice any commonality in what filled them?"

"A commonality?"

"Think about it. You might uncover something unexpected."

"Well..."

Yuder, lost in thought, suddenly spoke.

"...The Commander?"

"Huh?"

"Now that I think about it, most of them... seemed related to memories and emotions associated with the Commander."

The moment he spoke, Yuder's head began to throb slightly, and something he had unconsciously overlooked seemed to shed a thin veil, revealing itself layer by layer.

'It's like the dream. Initially, it was the memory of the day I killed Kishiar.'

Why hadn't he taken this seriously until now? He knew it intellectually, but he had been so focused on the newly surfaced memories and emotions that he had naturally glossed over the rest.

Yuder continued to rub his head in bewilderment, immersed in thought, then suddenly considered that the reason for the weakening of his soul's bond might be found in these very revelations.

'If everything I had forgotten is connected to Kishiar, then the most fundamentally shaking event since leaving the capital would be... that.'

"...White gloves."

Hearing the words slip through his lips, Enon blinked and asked in confusion.

"What gloves? What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"I had a strange nightmare a few days ago. The Commander from my past life, or rather, just his hands, appeared and tried to touch me, attempting some unidentifiable communication."

"Only the hands appeared? Ew, what kind of bizarre dream is that?"



Enon recoiled as if the hand from the dream might materialize right there. Yuder briefly explained the dream's content and then turned his gaze toward the window.

It was precisely the spot where the strange crack had appeared before.

"At first, I thought it was just an unsettling dream. But after talking to the Commander, I realized that the day I had that dream was precisely when the crack appeared in this southern branch."

"So... that anomaly might be related to the dream?"

"That, and maybe the dream affected the state of my soul, making it worse."

The dream had been somewhat peculiar. Unlike before, it wasn't reviving forgotten memories, but it felt as if something real had visited in the dream. If a disembodied hand could manifest such clear intent, how was that different from a ghost?

Yuder, after explaining his observations, asked,

"...What do you think?"

"Well... It's hard to say for sure right now, but it seems possible."

Enon didn't dismiss the speculation outright.

"If I could see this crack with my own eyes, things might become clearer..."

"That... I hope not, but it might be possible soon."

"What?"

Enon furrowed his brow in confusion.

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"What?"

Enon furrowed his brow in confusion.

"It seems the strange crack that appeared in the south this time might not be the last of it."

Yuder elaborated more on the Southern merchants he had captured, and the speculations he and Kishiar had made after interrogating them.

"When Aton was questioned, he said it's not over; the incident has already begun. I hope not, but it reminds me of the great Southern earthquake from the past life, or a similar disaster. We're preparing for the possibility," he explained.

If the speculation was correct, Enon would eventually witness the crack himself. Not a pleasant thought, indeed.

Listening, Enon sighed as if the mere thought gave him a headache.

"So much has happened. Now, I clearly understand why you called me," he said.

Yuder expected him to curse the situation, but instead, Enon fell silent. He crossed his arms and stared intently at the table, seemingly lost in thought.

"I've heard enough about the current situation. It's time to organize my thoughts."

Being with Enon usually meant noisy conversations amidst his shouting. Thus, this silence was a rare moment. Not wanting to disturb Enon's contemplation, Yuder silently watched him.

Enon usually expressed his emotions intensely, so his smooth, sculpted face, like a carefully crafted porcelain doll, wasn't easily noticeable. Unlike others with striking looks who attracted attention everywhere, Enon's appearance somehow remained less memorable.

'Even the Cavalry members think so.'

They often said Enon was handsome, but nobody delved deeper or showed excessive interest. It was as if they forgot about his looks until his name came up, then remembered him as 'the handsome pharmacist.'

Even when comparing him to Gakane, who often became the center of attention for his looks, or Kishiar, whose presence captivated everyone, Enon's unobtrusiveness was peculiar. Yet, no one seemed to find it strange.

Perhaps his ability to live freely in the 7th Wall District, despite his appearance, without being widely recognized, was the biggest proof that he wasn't human.

Suddenly, Enon lifted his head, as if concluding his thoughts. Noticing Yuder staring at him, he leaned back with a puzzled expression.

"Is there something on my face?"

"No."

"Then why look at me like that?"

"I was just looking. Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"No, but... it's unusual for you."

Confused and slightly suspicious, Enon rubbed his cheek as if to check for something on his face.

"Anyway, as you said, how this situation in the south is resolved could become a pivotal point affecting the entire Empire and the capital, right?"

Nodding in agreement, Enon continued with a serious expression.

"In truth, under normal circumstances, I should prioritize the capital. That's the duty given to a guardian who has contracted with Luma to protect the seven walls of the capital."

After speaking, Enon muttered, "But you know what?"

"Upon reflection, I've realized from your story that prioritizing one's mission above all else may not always be the best approach. It's a perspective I've never considered before."

Enon's gaze deepened, as if looking into a distant place.

"Listening to you, it's clear that 'the me of the past' certainly lived by prioritizing my mission. I would never have left the capital, remaining indifferent to the major currents of humanity."

Yuder knew well how Enon had lived. Originally, he was an inconspicuous pharmacist in the most rundown alley of the Seventh Wall District, rarely showing personal interest in external matters. Even when disasters and political turmoil erupted throughout the Empire, his stance remained unchanged.

Yuder had always found Enon's knowledge extensive and his generosity towards the wounded remarkable, yet there was something transcendental about him.

That was how Enon had lived his life, prioritizing his mission.

"But even I, who lived that way, eventually left the capital. After my death... I mean, after reabsorption and reformation, I left a message indicating my wish to help you again. It probably means that meeting you changed my mind. In other words, even 'I' had acknowledged that you were right."

Yuder's heart raced at this revelation.

"Reabsorption and reformation mean..."

"As I said before, if I hadn't returned after leaving, it would mean death. That's reabsorption. And not being able to remember upon meeting again, that's reformation."

It was a concept difficult to grasp. As Yuder blinked, Enon calmly added, "When the protection of the Seven Walls is in peril or my body faces irrecoverable harm, I can abandon it and return as part of the Seven Walls. From a human perspective, it's akin to dying."

"..."

"But it's not the same as human death. If the Seven Walls regain stability, depending on the circumstances, I can reform and return. However, I would be like a newborn in all aspects, including memory."

It was an unimaginable explanation, yet Yuder had to admit that Enon's last letter precisely matched this concept of reabsorption and reformation.

'Enon must have chosen to leave the capital, believing in my words...'

Back then, Yuder doubted everything and felt that no one believed his words, including Enon. Only after reading Enon's last letter did he regretfully realize Enon's sincerity, but it was too late for them to meet again.

Yuder found it hard to fathom Enon's trust in him, revealed in his last letter, and his heart to mention their reunion despite knowing he could die and leave the capital.

How could he have trusted him so much?

Yuder recalled Enon, who often scolded him upon his frequent injured returns, calling himself "brother." His chest tightened with emotion.

Yuder reflected on what it might have been like if he had candidly shared his thoughts and objectives with Enon back then, exchanging ideas and assistance. He wondered if anything could have changed if he had been able to talk freely about the disasters and the seeds of destruction he had witnessed, like now, instead of realizing it only after death. It seemed almost comical to him now.

'Sigh... I really was foolish.'

Yuder, gazing downward, sighed deeply and then looked at Enon, grateful for the current moment made possible by not repeating the same mistakes.

"I have been thinking... After returning here, perhaps you, in your past life, had foreseen the day I would come back to meet you again."

"How could that be? I don't have such abilities."

"Had you experienced this reabsorption before?"

"A few times. During the period when I was still inept at handling my physical form."

Enon grumbled about how those past failures had led him to establish his current way of living.

"Do you have any guess where you might have gone after leaving the capital?"

"Well, that's obvious. Where else but Gyllandr Hill?"

Gyllandr Hill was where the Archmage Ruma had last stayed and a place Enon had previously mentioned he should visit.

"Enon. You haven't gone there yet, have you?"

"No. I've been too busy because of someone."

"When I return from the south, can I go there with you?"

"With you?"

Enon, seeming surprised, rubbed his chin and then slowly nodded.

"Sure, I suppose it wouldn't be a problem... Alright."

"And then, about the hidden page within the First Duke Tain's journal that I was supposed to receive in the capital. Can I get it now?"

"And then, about the hidden page within the First Duke Tain's journal that I was supposed to receive in the capital. Can I get it now?"

"Ah... Right, that. Yes, I brought it, so just wait a moment."

Enon rose from his seat and began rummaging through his belongings.

"But in the midst of our busy schedule, will we even have time to examine this?"

"Just before coming to the South, I discovered a relic bearing traces of both the First Duke Tain and the Archmage Luma."

"What?"

Enon, holding a bundle of papers, turned his head in surprise, letting the papers slip through his fingers.

"Where?! Why are you only telling me this now? Why not in a letter?"

"For security reasons."

"Still, that's no excuse!"

Enon, who seemed ready to grab someone by the collar, finally calmed down and extracted the sought-after item from the crumpled papers.

"Take this! And explain quickly!"

Yuder, having received the original journal and papers, began to speak.

"When I visited a small village in the southwest, I discovered monster corpses hidden in an ancient underground cemetery."

Yuder shared that these were experimental subjects hidden by the First Duke Tain and mentioned a brooch engraved with Luma's symbol, the lemon flower, along with new fragments of the First Duke Tain's journal found there.

"The Commander speculated that Luma might have visited the tomb after its creation, leaving the brooch as a sign of condolence. There was a similar incident in the imperial palace long ago."

"..."

"If you have any insights or knowledge, please share."

Insight or knowledge..."

Enon took a deep breath and pressed his forehead.

"The lemon flower brooch would indeed belong to Luma. He never strayed far when he was with me, so it must have been after he left Gyllandr Hill... Ah."

"..."

"Anyway... My guess is, Luma wouldn't have visited a place out of mere personal sentiment. He must have felt a need to go there, and while there, possibly left the brooch."

"So, you think Luma was looking for something in that relic?"

"Yes, that's my thought."

"But the journal suggests that Luma and the First Duke Tain had a falling out and ceased contact. Could it mean Luma changed his mind afterward?"

"Possibly. Or maybe he learned something new outside that made him curious about his former apprentice's research."



Nothing was certain, but if the only being who could speak of an archmage who lived a millennium ago as if they had met yesterday, says so, it seemed plausible to at least consider the possibility.

"So, what happened to Luma's brooch you found? Do you have it?"

Lost in thought, Yuder was questioned by Enon, whose eyes now held a complex expression.

"No. The Commander took it. He intended to send it to Kanna for investigation, but I haven't been able to confirm it since. With all that's happened since coming here, it might not have been sent."

Luckily, since Kanna was currently here, it wouldn't be difficult to determine the brooch's whereabouts.

"Right, I see."

Enon pushed himself off the table and rose to his feet.

"Let's end the conversation here. If you have more to say, come find me later."

"To look for the brooch?"

"Not just that, but yes, I'm curious."

Though he spoke casually, Enon's strides as he walked away were noticeably hurried and brisk.

"Enon."

"What."

The man, about to step out the door, paused and turned his head at Yuder's call.

"If you want to stay longer, feel free. You don't need to ask me."

He seemed to understand that Yuder wanted to quietly remain a bit longer in the medical unit. After a moment of silence, Yuder spoke.

"Thank you for trusting me."

Enon, hand on the doorknob, raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"What... Why say that all of a sudden?"

"Just something I wanted to say. You can go now."

"Ha, as if it's easy to leave after hearing such words! Huh?"

Enon, who had shouted in a burst of emotion, strode back, sighed deeply, and pinched Yuder's cheeks, stretching them sideways.

"You, listen. Don't get any wrong ideas, alright?"

"...I wasn't thinking anything."

Ignoring the strained articulation of his speech, Enon's grip tightened as he responded.

"I trusted you because it seemed right to do so. There's no need to thank me for that. I may not have regretted anything I've done in life, but in this case, that's irrelevant. So don't you dare think you need to apologize or regret not trusting me before!"

Enon spoke as if he had read Yuder's thoughts, even though Yuder hadn't said a word.

"My trust in you now is because you trusted and approached me first. It's pointless to debate which came first. My decision to stay here and observe the situation, rather than return to the capital, all stems from the same context."

"..."

"So, if useless thoughts come to mind, just focus on taking care of yourself and eat more. Understand?"

"..."

"Answer me."

"I understand."

"Good."

Finally, Enon released his grip.

"It's not that I hate being thanked. I trust you understand what I mean. Now, I'll go."

Brushing off his hands, Enon turned and left, his departure marked by the sound of the closing door.

Yuder sat alone, quietly watching the closed door.

Despite a lingering pain, his heart felt inexplicably lighter.

—

Time passed swiftly, and it was soon evening, though it felt like nothing significant had happened.

Yuder went to find Kanna, intending to meet Hosanna as planned. He found her in the parlor next to the dining hall, engaged in animated conversation with a group. Upon seeing Yuder, she quickly stood up.

"Yuder! You're here."

"I'm about to go meet the person we agreed to see this evening. If you're busy, I can go alone."

"No, I was just waiting here, talking a bit. It's time to leave."

Kanna bid farewell to the group and moved briskly. Despite being new here, her incredible sociability made it seem as if she had always belonged.

"You seem to have made friends quickly."

"Yes. Everyone's so nice and friendly. I didn't expect so many from the Star of Nagran to be here, but the Commander's strategy is truly impressive."

Her words seemed innocent, but there was more to it. While Kanna was naturally sociable, her immediate mingling with many people upon arrival was likely a subtle way of assessing if there were any odd characters in the branch.

But since she spoke highly of everyone's character, it meant that there was no need to suspect anyone in the southern branch as an enemy.

'With Kanna here, things are indeed easier in this respect.'

"I heard many interesting stories while talking with them. There's a lot of news I couldn't have known just from letters. I would have missed out otherwise."

"...I thought I had conveyed all the necessary stories."

Yuder found it slightly puzzling to think there might be stories he'd regret not knowing, but Kanna's perspective was entirely different.

"No way! You were wearing an incredible outfit when you and the Commander smashed that illegal fighting ring, or how you alone sent hundreds of people flying! Why didn't you write about that?"

"..."

Yuder had thought the outfit given to him at the fighting ring, designed to mimic ancient clothing, was quite conspicuous, but not to the extent of being termed incredible. He had assumed the lack of

comment from the members and Awakeners who saw him then meant it was not a big deal. However, learning that it was still being discussed behind his back was somewhat bewildering.

'I'll have to find out who's been spreading these stories during training later.'

"Oh right. Earlier, I went to the underground prison with Alik and met Reneve as well. She truly has remarkable abilities. But honestly, I was more surprised by the invisible Awakener with her."

"Why?"

Surprised by her unexpected remark, Yuder asked for clarification. Kanna glanced around before lowering her voice.

"Was her name Cyregina? When she was using her powers, I couldn't read her at all. It was like she literally became invisible!"

"You mean you couldn't read her even while in contact?"

"Yes. I tried touching her, of course. It didn't work."

Kanna seemed both amazed and slightly wounded in pride. It was the first time her ability had utterly failed to read someone, even when she consciously exerted it.

"Now that I can control my power as needed, I thought things were going well. But now I see a new wall in front of me. Oh dear. The path of training never ends."

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"Now that I can control my power as needed, I thought things were going well. But now I see a new wall in front of me. Oh dear. The path of training never ends."

Indeed, the abilities of Reneve and Cyregina were too valuable to be overlooked. Kanna seemed to think the same.

"I casually asked them, and both expressed a desire to remain in the Cavalry if possible. Cyregina's punishment, I hear, is likely to be greatly reduced. Until it's completely resolved, it seems wise to

contract them in a general employment capacity with the Cavalry, supporting their livelihood for stability."

"Mm."

"I'm thinking of tempting them to come to the capital headquarters while they're here. It's just a hunch, but I don't think they'd refuse."

For her, who now planned perfect tasks without needing to speak, Yuder promised to devise a new training regimen that she could do alongside her work.

"Wow... really? Ha-ha... Yuder creating a special training regimen just for me... That's... really nice. Ugh, ugh."

Kanna let out a pained groan, even as she expressed her joy.

Their conversation continued in low tones until they entered the underground, where it ceased as if on cue.

"Hello, you two. You're going in, aren't you?"

Reneve, who they had just been discussing, sat in front of the only entrance to the underground, greeting them. She was comfortably seated in a rocking chair, knitting with tri-colored yarn, a gift from Cavalry members who felt indebted to her.

The items were plain and unimpressive compared to the luxurious ones in the room where she had stayed in the illegal fighting ring, but Reneve was said to be genuinely delighted with them.

"You seem to have had a hard time, too. Aren't you tired?"

"Not at all. I can maintain this even in my sleep."

Reneve shook her head and smiled brightly in response to Kanna's question.

"I want to help, so don't worry and go ahead, both of you."

Yuder nodded silently, passing her and crossing the 'boundary'.

As he did, the air shifted, perceptible only to Awakeners, and his body suddenly felt heavy. He had entered Reneve's Awakener ability-suppression area.

The place, once a noble's mansion, had solemn yet elegant corridors and several closed doors. Inside, those captured in the recent battle were held separately.

Several members, staying underground for surveillance and investigation, recognized them and nodded in greeting. Kanna greeted them first, then led Yuder to a room not far from the entrance.

That was where Hosanna was.

"I'll be waiting outside, Yuder. After a while, I'll send a signal and come in."

Leaving Kanna's reassuring words behind, Yuder knocked on the door. A thin voice soon invited, "Come in."

"..."

"Ah... you've arrived."

Hosanna, sitting on the bed, stood up awkwardly to greet him. Despite knowing from Kanna that Yuder would visit that evening, his face was extremely rigid.

His pale, strained complexion hinted at more than mere awkwardness and tension; there was a certain gravitas.

'After all, we haven't really seen each other alone since the early days of him waking up.'

Despite this, Hosanna had requested to meet with Yuder. There surely had to be a reason for it.

Yuder quietly moved forward, pulling a chair closer to sit down. It was a position suitably distant yet directly facing the other.

"Traveling all the way here from the capital must have been quite taxing. How do you feel?"

"Why... Why are you suddenly speaking in that manner?"

"Whether I like it or not, since the Cavalry has received assistance from you, it seems only right to start with due courtesy."

Seeing Yuder attempt to speak with politeness, Hosanna looked startled, as if a rigorous interrogation had begun.

"Please, don't do that. Just, just speak as you usually do."

"Well, if that makes you more comfortable."

Only then did Hosanna heave a sigh, running a hand over his chest.

"So, how do you feel?"

"I'm... I'm alright."

"Do you think your powers have recovered to any extent?"

"I... I'm not sure. I feel like I'm continually recovering, but powers aren't something quantifiable..."

Yuder, treating him as a novice Awakener struggling to gauge his own abilities, stretched out all ten fingers.

"Alright. Then, if the farthest distance you could travel before was equivalent to ten fingers, how far do you think you can travel now, in comparison?"



Hosanna, who had been looking fearfully at Yuder's hand, slowly lifted seven fingers of his own.

"...About this much."

'Seventy percent of the original capacity. Whether he can recover further is uncertain, but with proper preparation, he might be able to traverse the continent,' Yuder thought, nodding without revealing his thoughts.

"Understood. If you notice anything unusual, make sure to tell me. And, I heard you wanted to speak with me."

"Ah..."

Finally, the heart of the matter. Hosanna took a deep breath, closing his eyes momentarily before lifting his head.

"I presume you already know, but the reason I helped the Cavalry and came here is... I heard there was a serious issue between Nahan and the sage... Is that really true?"

Yuder, noticing that Hosanna no longer referred to the sage with the same ease, began to speak.

"What difference does it make whether I say it's true or someone else does? You'll either believe it or not, regardless of who says it."

Hosanna's fist, resting on his knee, trembled with tension, but his voice was clear, as if practiced for a long time.

"No. You saved me. So, there is a difference."

"You remember that?"

"I do. You did something to my body. It was painful... but I know that suddenly, strength surged through me, and I became conscious."

Hosanna surprisingly remembered the events surrounding him waking from a coma well.

"You could have just left me to die, but you didn't. There must have been a reason for saving me."

"..."

"I... I thought maybe you found my powers useful and that's why you saved me. And now, having regained my abilities, I've shown my worth to the Cavalry... So, I guess..."

Just when it seemed he was speaking well, his spirit began to wane once again upon making eye contact with Yuder. Observing this, Yuder leaned back a bit more comfortably in his chair.

"So, you think I valued your abilities highly enough to want to keep you alive, and that makes me more trustworthy than others. In return for proving your usefulness, you want to trade for the truth. Is that what you mean?"

Hosanna nodded faintly.

"Okay. Well, to answer your question as you wish, all the news you've heard is true."

"Ah...."

A sigh of regret unknowingly escaped from Hosanna's lips, tense with anxiety.

"Then, is Nahan... really still alive? And what about the sage?"

To Yuder's observation, Hosanna wasn't asking out of ignorance. He genuinely sought assurance from Yuder.

"As far as we know, Nahan is presumed to have headed south, but his condition is likely not good. The last eyewitnesses who saw him reported severe injuries. The sage, after confronting Nahan in the capital, proceeded south with the aid of Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince. He should arrive soon."

Hosanna bit his lip so hard it seemed he might draw blood.

"Why has this happened? The sage was a devoted protector... why would he turn against Nahan?"

Yuder hesitated to provide that answer, but if confirmation was needed...

While Hosanna seemed considerably free from the sage's influence, it was uncertain if he could fully comprehend the following truth. Yet, Yuder looked into his eyes and spoke candidly.

"The sage and Nahan's goals were likely different from the beginning. Despite maintaining the status quo without a word, the moment they could grasp their true objectives, the truth emerged."

"..."

"A time like this was bound to come. That much I can assure you."

In his past life, the Star of Nagran had also faced a division and eventual downfall due to internal strife.

Though Hosanna didn't fully grasp the underlying meaning of Yuder's words, he seemed to sense the peculiar certainty in them. Gasping for breath, he bowed his head, clutching his garment, and murmured in a barely audible voice.

"If I... if I further aid the Cavalry... can they save Nahan?"